

# Can My Dancers Do That?

by Meredith Butulis

Often, we see new tricks and skills, whether it be on TV, at a workshop, or watching a performance. It is tempting to take that trick back to the team, instructing them to 'try this!' However, this opens the door for concerns regarding safety and dancer frustration. This article will look at factors to evaluate to help decide if you want to teach your team a new trick or skill, as well as what the key elements are to instruct.

While young kids learn by copying, you will discover that many of your dancers are losing this ability, and may need more formal cueing and instruction to achieve a certain level of performance with new skills and tricks. This is a normal part of the ageing process.<sup>4</sup> This increases the need for the coach to be able to break down the steps and key elements in order to provide additional instruction to the dancers.

## Skills

Each skill has a particular set of fitness basics that underlie it. Those basics include having pre-requisite amounts of balance, range of motion, and strength.<sup>1</sup> Once those key elements are present, one can add coordination and timing cues to reach the full expression of the skill. Let's look at each of these basics for a moment before we apply them.

- Skill
- Coordination/ timing
- Range of motion
- Strength
- Balance
- Trick
- Balance

How well can your dancer stand on one foot? How well can she hold this position in releve? A dancer that has truly mastered balance will be able to demonstrate a variety of positions for the arms, as well as the working leg during the balance. You can also measure functional balance. For example, if you want a dancer to do 5 pirouettes, can she hold the appropriate position without turning for at least 5 seconds?

## Range of motion (ROM)

Does your dancer have the appropriate range of motion without using momentum? For example, if you want your dancer to perform a firebird, can she sit on the floor in the splits with her back leg touching her head?

It is important to allow your dancers to gradually work into their individual flexibility limits. Teenage dancers are growing, and their bones may lengthen before their muscles. This means that there may be a season where a particular dancer cannot be stretched further without a high risk of injury.<sup>3</sup>

Also, there may be other factors limiting a dancer's range of motion.<sup>2</sup> For example, scoliosis may limit the ability to bend the spine a particular direction. As another example, some dancers are born with an oddly shaped hip, which creates a pinching when the dancer attempts to stretch it further. This is a bony block, and cannot be stretched through.

Always look at a skill and evaluate how much motion you need from the back, each hip, and possibly each shoulder. Then see if the dancer has it independent of the skill. Throwing momentum or another force against a range of motion that a dancer does not have will very likely lead to injury over time.

Pay particular attention to the back leg in splits and arabesque type motions. Many dancers over-stretch their hamstrings and focus on the front leg. Dance team dancers tend to have tight hip flexors, which limits the ability of the leg to go behind the body. This motion behind the body is one of the main factors that determines how amazing leaping skills look. Not only does it affect performance, but also safety. If the dancer attempts to get the motion by arching the low back instead, this will likely lead to back trouble for the dancer.

### Works Referenced

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2. Deighan, MA. (2005) Flexibility in Dance. Journal of Dance Medicine & Science.
3. Education Committee (2000) The Challenges of the Adolescent Dancer. Resource Paper. International Association of Dance Medicine and Science. [www.iadms.org](http://www.iadms.org).
4. Shumway-Cook A, Woollacott M (1995). Motor Control. Lippincott Williams & Wilkins. Baltimore.

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Skills

Range of Motion

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## Strength

Is your dancer strong enough to hold the position that you are looking for? For example, if you want your dancers to perform à la second turns, can they hold the position and plié-releve without turning? If you want to do a leg hold turn, can the dancer hold

a tilt without sticking her tail out and arching her low back? If you want dancer to do cartwheels, can she perform basic pushups and hand stands against a wall without wrist pain or bending her elbows?

## Timing/Coordination

Timing and coordination are some of the most challenging areas for dancers to learn without coach cueing. Different cues will work for different girls, so this is where your experiences as a coach have a chance to shine. When evaluating a skill, look at the 4 counts before the peak of the skill. Try to break the counts into fractions of counts. If possible, try watching the skill in a frame-by-frame or slow motion video playback. The secret to the skill's timing is the counts BEFORE the skill. You must change the preparation for the skill if you desire for the peak of the skill to look different. You should be able to divide a movement into at least 3 very clear phases (preparation, skill peak, landing) prior to teaching the skill. Your dancers will need clear instructions for all 3 phases in order to achieve success.

Skill	URL	Basic pre-requisite components
<b>Jazz pirouette</b>	<a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGuvXwJW8QQ&amp;feature=relmfu">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGuvXwJW8QQ&amp;feature=relmfu</a>	<b>Balance:</b> Balance in position for at least 1 sec/turn <b>ROM:</b> Hip must flex to 90 degrees to make thigh parallel to floor without hip hike <b>Strength:</b> Ability to hold a releve with a straight knee <b>Coordination:</b> Spotting ability, arm: leg coordination, ability to achieve position quickly
<b>Fouetté turn</b>	<a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ME1EShO98CE&amp;feature=relmfu">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ME1EShO98CE&amp;feature=relmfu</a>	<b>Balance:</b> Balance in each position while repeating the pattern without turning repeatedly <b>ROM:</b> Hip must flex to 90 degrees in turnout with straight legs to make thigh parallel to floor without hip hike <b>Strength:</b> Ability to hold each position at least 1 second while repeating thru the pattern without turning <b>Coordination:</b> Spotting ability, arm: leg coordination, ability to achieve position quickly
<b>Basic leap</b>	<a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DYXJGuHCPk&amp;feature=relmfu">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DYXJGuHCPk&amp;feature=relmfu</a>	<b>ROM:</b> Ability to perform the splits (pay particular attention the straight back leg) <b>Strength:</b> Ability to battement front and back, ability to clear the floor on a unilateral sote jump <b>Coordination:</b> Many times dancers 'kick' with the front leg, or are slow on the back leg pushing off; these are errors to watch for
<b>Back extension roll</b>	<a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1b-Zu96Z9NA&amp;playlist=1&amp;list=PL035CF8C06DC1B01E">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1b-Zu96Z9NA&amp;playlist=1&amp;list=PL035CF8C06DC1B01E</a>	<b>Balance:</b> Ability to hold a handstand independently for at least a full second <b>ROM:</b> Must be able to extend arms completely overhead; must be able to control elbow hyperextension if present; wrists must bend all the way back (as in doing a push up without wrist pain) <b>Strength:</b> Able to hold a basic handstand for at least 1 second <b>Coordination:</b> This skill is very much based on the point at which the legs push up or backwards; most dancers will be late on this push back with the legs to get them to the handstand position
<b>Skills: Back roll, handstand</b>		<b>Note:</b> This is a level 5 gymnastics skill, do not expect dancers to learn skills greater than level 1 quickly
<b>Earstand</b>	<a href="http://screencast.com/t/X&amp;RWWv">http://screencast.com/t/X&amp;RWWv</a>	<b>Balance:</b> Ability to hold a basic yoga-style headstand will help <b>ROM:</b> Neck must bend sideways without pain <b>Strength:</b> Excellent core control, such as ability to hold a plank for at least 30 seconds <b>Skills:</b> Ability to earstand with knees bent first
<b>Toe rise back bend</b>	<a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B30_a-DJvQo">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B30_a-DJvQo</a>	<b>Balance:</b> Ability to hold balance for at least a half second while on tops of toes <b>ROM:</b> Ability to perform a basic gymnastics bridge with feet hip width apart and shoulders over wrists; ability to fully point ankles so that shins are in line with tops of feet <b>Strength:</b> Ability to perform a push up on knees <b>Coordination:</b> The coordination of the arms with the push from the feet is the key; the position of the head is also a key

## Skills and their components (examples)

Here are some examples so that you may think about the basic components that must be present in order to have a reasonable probability of success in teaching the skill.

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Strength

Timing/Coordination

Skills & Their Components.

# Can My Dancers Do That?

## Skills vs. Tricks

Let's also spend a moment on skills versus tricks. A skilled movement takes many years to learn and perfect. A trick is something that can be taught quickly with little practice to those with a certain set of base skills.

Dancers without mastery of basic skills will have difficulty with tricks. Some examples of tricks include spinning (turns without spotting), partner-spotted hand stands, cartwheels on elbows, basic breakdancing freezes, and the basic breakdance-style valdez.

## The next step: Application

Now that you've seen examples of how to break skills down, it is time to try your own example.

**Step 1:** Find a video of a skill that you are interested in. Make sure that the skill includes the preparation and landing. Break the skill into at least 3 phases (preparation, action, landing).

**Step 2:** Break down the balance, range of motion, strength, and coordination requirements for the skill for each of the 3 phases. Make sure your dancers have the necessary balance, range of motion, and strength to be likely to perform this skill. The steps and examples for this are outlined above.

**Step 3:** Watch the 4 counts before the preparation over and over again. Preferably frame-by-frame. If your dancers have the necessary balance, range of motion, and strength, the secret to the trick is hiding here.

**Step 4:** Make a clear outline of what balance, ROM, and strength requirements you will need to test with your dancers first.

**Step 5:** Make a clear outline of the cues you will use to instruct the correct coordination. Try finding videos of the skill done incorrectly (i.e. on you tube), as this will help you know what to look for. Remember that different dancers will respond to different cues, so it is important to have a very clear picture of the timing and coordination of the skill in your head. Sometimes it helps if you have access to a video camera that can show frame-by-frame movements. This way, you and your dancer can watch timing issues together.

## Final notes: A note on gymnastics skills

Gymnastics skills have a specific level assigned with their mastery. If you try to teach a level 5 skill to a dancer with no previous gymnastics training, disappointment and frustration are likely. If you wish to work with gymnastics skills, start at level 1. This includes a cartwheel, handstand, forward roll, and backward roll.

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Skills vs. Tricks

A Note on Gymnastic Skills.